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Taking a Step-by-Step Approach to Growth

By HILARIE M. SHEETS

NEAL BENEZRA is not a showman. But as museum directors nationwide face plummeting endowments and potentially crippling budget cuts, Mr. Benezra's even-keeled approach and penchant for collaboration in his stewardship of the [San Francisco Museum of Modern Art](#) may be a blueprint for how to endure the financial uncertainty.

"We benefited from the fact that we went through a tough time seven years ago," said Mr. Benezra, 55, who grew up in the Bay Area.

He became director in 2002, soon after the dot-com bubble had burst. The museum had just undergone a huge growth spurt. Riding the wave of affluence amassed in the area from high-tech industries since the 1980s, the museum had moved in 1995 from cramped, shared quarters in the War Memorial Building to its expansive home designed by Mario Botta.

Under the leadership of Jack Lane and then David Ross, it aggressively acquired works by artists like [Piet Mondrian](#), René Magritte, [Mark Rothko](#) and [Robert Rauschenberg](#) to fill its new galleries. But the institution's quick growth could not be sustained. When the dot-coms crashed in 2001, Mr. Ross left abruptly, a dozen staff members were laid off, and the museum faced a \$2 million deficit.

Mr. Benezra, who came to the job after serving simultaneously as deputy director and head curator of modern and contemporary art at the [Art Institute of Chicago](#), said he learned a lot from his initiation, when he cut \$2 million from the budget.

"We actually lost more money than we saved, which was a revelation to me and the board," said Mr. Benezra, who has operated the museum in the black since 2003. "Our membership declined, our attendance declined, our philanthropy declined."

He then took a more deliberate tack of slowing the pace of exhibitions and stretching resources, rather than shutting down activities as the city recovered. “If you cut excessively — and I think I can say this is wisdom for our current situation in our field right now — the public will lose interest in you,” he said. “It’s a very fine line, but you can create a recession of your own making if you’re too extreme in the reduction of your program.”

During the recent years of market exuberance, as many museums completed high-profile expansions, Mr. Benezra followed a pragmatic course of expanding the museum in manageable steps. On May 10, the museum is to open its first new space since 1995 — a 14,400-square-foot rooftop sculpture garden, designed by the San Francisco firm Jensen Architects. On display will be large-scale works by [Louise Bourgeois](#), [Ellsworth Kelly](#) and Barnett Newman, among others.

“It’s fully funded, fully endowed, on budget and on schedule, and that puts a smile on my face these days,” Mr. Benezra said. He added that the \$24 million donated for the project by five trustees was the easiest money he had ever had to raise.

Mr. Benezra said that he and the board chairman, [Charles Schwab](#), founder of the eponymous investment firm, had their eyes on two spaces flanking the museum for future expansion but were waiting for the economy to improve.

“Outside of New York, there’s more great contemporary art in the Bay Area than anyplace else in the U.S., and we have to convince our donors that if they are good enough to leave their objects to us, there’s space to show them,” Mr. Benezra said, noting that the creation of the sculpture garden had resulted in recent gifts of work by Mario Merz and Joel Shapiro.

He said that when he arrived at the museum, 70 percent of the 50,000 square feet of gallery space was given over to special exhibitions. Now it’s closer to 60 percent. “A really great museum that grows to maturity dedicates itself to its collection,” he said. “I would ultimately like to see a 50-50 ratio without cutting the exhibition program.”

The lineup of monographic exhibitions organized during his tenure, including shows of [Diane Arbus](#), [Olafur Eliasson](#), Eva Hesse, [Sol LeWitt](#) and Jeff Wall, may be where Mr. Benezra has put his strongest imprint on the museum.

“We’re trying to create a balanced diet between modern and contemporary, between popular and challenging,” said Mr. Benezra, who was a co-curator of the Wall show in conjunction with the Museum of Modern Art in New York. “It’s very important to me that we get people to come in and see a show of Calder or [Matisse](#) so that when you do Olafur Eliasson or Jeff

Wall, your public has a base of knowledge about modern art that they can take to appreciate a younger contemporary artist.”

Last Saturday, a three-decade retrospective of the South African artist [William Kentridge](#), co-organized with the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Fla., and destined for seven other cities, opened at the San Francisco museum.

“Almost to a fault, I love to partner with other institutions,” Mr. Benezra said. “Sometimes it makes it difficult because it’s harder for two museums to organize a show, but I love the collegiality of that.”

In the next couple of years, his institution will collaborate on the first United States retrospective of Luc Tuymans with the Wexner Center for the Arts in Columbus, Ohio, as well as on a show reassembling the collections of [Gertrude Stein](#) and her brother and sister-in-law Michael and Sarah Stein with the Grand Palais in Paris.

Mr. Benezra has always been a curator first, rising through the ranks after receiving his doctorate in art history from Stanford in 1983. He was given his first curatorial post by James Demetrian at the Des Moines Art Center and moved in 1985 to the Art Institute of Chicago, where he organized a [Martin Puryear](#) show.

In 1991, he was hired again by Mr. Demetrian, who was then director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, as chief curator. There, Mr. Benezra organized a Bruce Nauman retrospective with the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis and shows on [Edward Ruscha](#) and Juan Muñoz, among others. In 1996 he took on the additional role of assistant director until returning to the Art Institute in 2000.

Olga Viso, now director of the Walker Art Center, was hired by Mr. Benezra as an assistant curator at the Hirshhorn in 1994 and considers him her mentor.

“I learned my curatorial, installation and collection-building skills from Neal,” Ms. Viso said. “He’s a great long-view, strategic thinker. Watching Neal, I learned the importance of balancing impulse with patience.”

Their institutions co-organized the [Frida Kahlo](#) exhibition last year, and it was the most highly attended show in the San Francisco museum’s history.

Mr. Benezra’s institution has also been a pioneer in joint acquisitions between museums as a way to share costs during the recent years of a skyrocketing art market. He has partnered with the Hirshhorn on a video piece by Gary Hill, with the Walker on a multimedia

installation by [Matthew Barney](#), and most recently with the Art Institute and the Guggenheim on a sculpture by Felix Gonzalez-Torres.

“Neal has subtle leadership qualities,” said Mr. Demetrian, now retired. “He has a good rapport with people at all levels, which is very important. He’s able to work with trustees and he’s able to work with colleagues, not just at the museum but in other institutions as well.”

Mr. Benezra plans to mark the museum’s 75th anniversary next year with shows drawn from the permanent collection (which, not inconsequently, are cheaper to produce). “We want this anniversary to tell stories about our history that make it clear why we matter,” he said.

Founded in 1935, the museum is one of the three oldest in the country, along with [MoMA](#) and the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#) in New York, dedicated to modern and contemporary art. It gave [Jackson Pollock](#) his first museum show, as well as [Arshile Gorky](#) and Clyfford Still, who returned the favor in 1975 with a gift of 28 canvases.

“I really grew up in the museum,” said Mr. Benezra, whose father, a second-generation Abstract Expressionist painter and art teacher in San Francisco, took him to shows often installed in the third- and fourth-floor hallways of the original building. He said he would never forget the 1979 opening of “The Dinner Party,” Judy Chicago’s iconic feminist installation. “It was very funky, very San Francisco,” said Mr. Benezra, who then watched the museum’s ambitious transformation in the 1980s and 1990s as it achieved a new stature in its own building.

As he considers the future, Mr. Benezra is remarkably nonalarmist. “In December we made an appeal to our board for program support over and above what they normally do and got double what we were expecting,” he said, adding that the museum also received gifts of 225 works of art in 2008, the most in years. “I think the board is very enamored of the program we’ve established. They’ve all repeated the mantra to be prudent, make tough decisions, but don’t hurt what we’ve built here.”

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